

At least 14 Haitian migrants drowned off the coast of the Bahamas

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The US Coast Guard continued searching Tuesday for as many as 10 Haitian migrants still missing in the waters northwest of Nassau, Bahamas after an incident Saturday in which a boat capsized leaving 14 migrants dead. The coast guard and Bahamian rescuers pulled three survivors from the water on Monday, two of whom were Haitian, while the third was Honduran. Identified by another survivor as the “smuggler” attempting to transport the migrants to south Florida, the Honduran was soon taken into custody by Bahamian immigration officials.

As many as 25 or 27 people were said to be on board the migrant vessel when it sank late on Saturday. Fishermen were the first to come upon the scene, notifying authorities of the catastrophe after hearing the screams of people adrift in the water early Sunday morning. The Haitian survivors, a man a woman, are currently being treated for complications from prolonged exposure to the water, having been transferred to a hospital from the detention center at which they were being held.

This weekend’s tragedy is the kind that has become all too familiar. In May 2007, at least 61 Haitians were killed when a boat overturned in the area of the Turks and Caicos islands. Survivors of that incident said their sailboat, loaded with 160 people, was rammed by a patrol boat as they approached Providenciales, a northwestern island in the Caicos chain. Their migrant vessel capsized, they said, as patrol boats then attempted to tow them away.

Conditions in Haiti, the poorest country in the western hemisphere, have forced thousands to flee on such dangerous journeys, as many as 10,000 attempting to make it to the United States from 2003-2007. The Coast Guard reports that 490 Haitian migrants have been intercepted and returned to Haiti so far this year,

while 1,583 were repatriated in 2007. Following the riots over food prices earlier this month, the Coast Guard has increased its presence in the Windward Passage in anticipation of increasing numbers of people attempting to escape the country.

The conditions that compel people to undertake such risky evacuations are appalling. 80 percent of Haiti’s population lives on \$2 a day or less.

Already struggling to attain the most basic necessities for survival, the country’s poor have been hard hit by an international food crisis in which food prices have increased by 40 percent since mid-2007. Long lines of those seeking food aid from the United Nations and other regional sources are commonplace, though the resources of these organizations are thoroughly inadequate. While most of the country has been starving, the Haitian government has pursued policies of privatization that have helped clear the way for the enrichment of an elite few.

Just as they have across the Middle East, Africa, Asia and Latin America, protests over high food prices erupted in Haiti in the first weeks of April in which thousands took to the streets. At least seven people were killed in the protests that saw the presidential palace of Rene Preval stormed by demonstrators, who were dispersed by Brazilian soldiers armed with tear gas and rubber bullets. In the midst of these struggles, Haiti’s senate voted to remove Prime Minister Jacques-Edouard Alexis from office.

Thousands faced with such social misery have fled the country by sea under the most dangerous circumstances and with no promise of sanctuary in the US. While Cubans, for obvious political reasons, are allowed to remain in the country if they reach the US coastline, under a policy implemented by the Clinton administration in 1994, Haitian refugees are treated like

pariahs.



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